

CARTER'S JUDGMENT

Delaying Raid Lessened Its Chances

By George C. Wilson
and Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writers

Vainly waiting for a diplomatic solution, President Carter missed the most opportune time for launching the hostage rescue mission to Iran, and thereby increased the risk of failure, according to government sources.

About last December, military planners from the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned the president that, if he was going to launch a secret raid, he should do so within about 90 days — before the end of March.

By April or before they warned, desert sandstorms would howl across the Iranian back-country, greatly complicating the long-dis-

tance logistics of the raid and lengthening odds against success.

When the mission was aborted 10 days ago, a raging late-April sandstorm in the southern desert of Iran was a principal component of the failure. It forced one helicopter to retreat to the Nimitz aircraft carrier in the Gulf of Oman, grounded another one temporarily in the desert and may have contributed to the technical breakdowns. The mission was scrubbed for want of enough helicopters.

This question of high-risk timing is one of many elements, disclosed by those with inside knowledge, which suggest an understanding of the mission plan that is quite different from that suggested by President Carter and his top mili-

tary advisers, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Gen. David C. Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

The president and his officials have portrayed the mission as "snake bit" by bad luck and random technological failures, but they insist that the original plan had "good" to "excellent" prospects for success.

To some planners, however, it always looked like a high-risk operation. Indeed, in corroborating details now filtering out, the picture is clear: preparations were made anticipating the possibility of extensive casualties, including perhaps of the hostages who were to be rescued.

See RAID, A30, Col. 1

RAID, From A1

This, in turn, underscores a fundamental change in President Carter's thinking about the long-running crisis. For six months, Carter said again and again that his main purpose was to save the 53 American captives in Tehran. But in launching the desert mission, he concluded that another objective had taken precedence — ending the crisis, once and for all.

Carter, said one administration official, wanted "to lance the boil," even if the outcome fell short of his original goal of rescuing all the hostages in good condition.

"A cancer that has to be removed," according to one adviser.

In fact, at one point the going estimate inside Pentagon and administration councils for a successful mission was as low as one in four, or 25 percent, sources said.

Gen. Jones came close to acknowledging this last week when he said at a Pentagon press conference that "in the initial stages we did not see an option that had a reasonable chance of success.

"After improvements, some in use of technology, exercises, concepts—we came to the conclusion that it was militarily feasible, and all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—we collectively addressed this—concluded that we had a good chance of success. There were some risks, yes . . ."

Jones and others have steadfastly declined to specify the degree of risk but one part of the operation that

has not been disclosed before suggests heavy casualties were considered a definite possibility.

Besides the C130 transports waiting for rescue helicopters in a secret escape base west of Tehran, sources revealed, the plan called for having giant C141 transports on call in case there were too many dead and wounded to fit inside the two C130s. The casualties would have been flown to a hospital in Egypt, presumably in Cairo.

Although this fits under prudent worst-case planning, the inclusion of the C141s throws new light on Secretary Brown's April 25 assertion that, once the Blue Light commando unit reached the embassy itself, this "was the part of the mission of which they were most confident." Brown said he and the Joint Chiefs had focused on the embassy takeover part of the plan before recommending the mission to Carter.

The apparent reason Carter, Brown and Jones put so much confidence in a plan considered risky by some other insiders was their conviction that the assault force could be called back quickly at almost any "fail-safe" point along the way and that the embassy could be taken by surprise, according to sources.

Brown suggested as much last week when he said "the plan provided for the possibility of terminating the operation because of any difficulties, such as mechanical failure or detection by the Iranians of the mission."

Yesterday sources disclose that an